

B1

1275

H3

1956

THE BOARDMAN LECTURESHIP  
IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

(FOUNDED ANNO DOMINI 1899.)

/"THE VALLEY OF DECISION"/

DELIVERED BEFORE

THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

February 14, 1956

BY

EDWARD G. HARRIS

Chaplain of the University of Pennsylvania

BJ

1275

H3

1956

## THE FOUNDATION

On June 6, 1899, the Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania accepted from the Rev. George Dana Boardman, D.D., LL.D., and his wife a Deed of Gift, providing for a foundation to be known as "The Boardman Lectureship in Christian Ethics," the income of the fund to be expended solely for the purposes of the Trust. Dr. Boardman served the University for twenty-three years as Trustee, for a time as Chaplain, and often as Ethical Lecturer. After provision for refunding out of the said income, any depreciation which might occur in the capital sum, the remainder is to be expended in procuring the delivery in each year at the University of Pennsylvania, of one or more lectures on Christian Ethics from the standpoint of the life, example and teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the publication in book form, of the said lecture or lectures within four months of the completion of their delivery. The volume in which they are printed shall always have in its forefront a printed statement of the history, the outline and terms of the Foundation.

On July 6, 1899, a Standing Committee on "The Boardman Lectures in Christian Ethics" was constituted, to which shall be committed the nominations of the lecturers and the publications of the lectures in accordance with the Trust.

On February 6, 1900, on recommendation of this committee, the Rev. George Dana Boardman, D.D., LL.D., was appointed Lecturer on Christian Ethics on the Boardman Foundation for the current year.

## THE OUTLINE

### I. THE PURPOSE

First, the purpose is not to trace the history of the various ethical theories; this is already admirably done in our own noble University. Nor is it the purpose to teach theology, whether natural, Biblical, or ecclesiastical. But the purpose of this Lectureship is to teach *Christian Ethics*; that is to say, the practical application of the precepts and behavior of JESUS CHRIST to everyday life.

And this is the greatest of the sciences. It is a great thing to know astronomy; for it is the science of mighty orbs, stupendous distances, majestic adjustments in time and space. It is a great thing to know biology; for it is the science of living organisms—of starting, growth, health, movements, life itself. It is a great thing to know law; for it is the science of legislation, government, equity, civilization. It is a great thing to know philosophy; for it is the science of men and things. It is a great thing to know theology; for it is the science of God. But what avails it to know everything in space from atom to star, everything in time from protoplasm to Deity, if we do not know how to manage ourselves amid the complex, delicate, ever-varying duties of daily life? What will it profit a man if he gain the whole world—the world geographical, commercial, political, intellectual, and after all lose his own soul? What can a University give in exchange for a Christlike character? Thus it is that ethics is the science of sciences. Very significant is the motto of our own noble University—*"Literæ Sine Moribus Vanæ."*

And Jesus of Nazareth is the supreme ethical authority. When we come to receive from him our final awards, he will not ask, "What was your theory of atoms? What did you think about evolution? What was your doctrine of atonement? What was your mode of baptism?" But he will ask "What did you do with Me? Did you accept Me as your personal standard of character? Were you a practical everyday Christian?" Christian Ethics will be the judgment test.

In sum, the purpose of this Lectureship in Christian Ethics is to build up human character after the model of Jesus Christ's.

## II. RANGE OF THE LECTURESHIP

Secondly, the Range of the Lectureship. This range should be as wide as human society itself. The following is offered in way of general outline and suggestive hints, each hint being of course but a specific or technical illustration growing out of some vaster underlying Principle.

1. *Man's Heart-Nature*.—And, first, man's religious nature. For example: *Christian* (not merely ethical) precepts concerning man's capacity for religion; worship; communion; divineness; immortality; duty of religious observances; the Beatitudes; in brief, Manliness in Christ.

2. *Man's Mind-Nature*.—Secondly, man's intellect-nature. For example: *Christian* precepts concerning reason; imagination; invention; æsthetics; language, whether spoken, written, sung, builded, painted, chiseled, acted, etc.

3. *Man's Society-Nature*.—Thirdly, man's society-nature. For example:

(a) *Christian* precepts concerning the personal life; for instance: conscientiousness, honesty, truthfulness, charity, chastity, courage, independence, chivalry, patience, altruism, etc.

(b) *Christian* precepts concerning the family life; for instance: marriage; divorce; duties of husbands, wives, parents, children, kindred, servants; place of woman, etc.

(c) *Christian* precepts concerning the business life; for instance: rights of labor; rights of capital; right of pecuniary independence; living within means; life insurance; keeping morally accurate accounts; endorsing; borrowing; prompt liquidation; sacredness of trust-funds, personal and corporate; individual moral responsibility of directors and officers; trust-combinations; strikes; boycotting; limits of speculation; profiting by ambiguities; single tax; nationalization of property, etc.

(d) *Christian* precepts concerning the civic life; for instance: responsibilities of citizenship; elective franchise; obligations of office; class-legislation; legal oaths; custom-house conscience; sumptuary laws; public institutions, whether educational, ameliorative, or reformatory; function of money; standard of money; public credit; civic reforms; caucuses, etc.

(e) *Christian* precepts concerning the international life; for instance: treaties; diplomacy; war; arbitration; disarmament; tariff; reciprocity; mankind, etc.

(f) *Christian* precepts concerning the ecclesiastical life; for instance: sectarianism; comity in mission fields; co-operation; unification of Christendom, etc.

(g) *Christian* precepts concerning the academic life; for instance: literary and scientific ideals; professional standards of morality; function of the press; copyrights; obligations of scholarship, etc.

In sum, *Christian* precepts concerning the tremendous problems of sociology, present and future.

Not that all the lecturers must agree at every point; often there are genuine cases of conscience, or reasonable doubt, in which a good deal can be justly said on both sides. The supreme point is this: Whatever the topic may be, the lecturer must discuss it conscientiously, in light of Christ's own teachings and character; and so awaken the consciences of his listeners, making their moral sense more acute.

4. *Man's Body-Nature*.—Fourthly, man's body-nature. For example: *Christian* precepts concerning environment; heredity; health; cleanliness; temperance; self-control; athletics; public hygiene; tenement-houses; prophylactics; the five senses; treatment of animals, etc.

In sum, the range of topics for this Lectureship in Christian Ethics should include whatever tends to society-building, or perfectionation of personal character in Christ. Surely here is material enough, and this without any need of duplication, for centuries to come.



### III. SPIRIT OF THE LECTURESHIP

Thirdly, the Spirit of this Lectureship. Every lecture must be presented from the standpoint of Jesus Christ. It must be distinctly understood, and the founder of the Lectureship cannot emphasize the point too strongly, that every lecture in these successive courses must be unambiguously Christian; that is, from the viewpoint of the divine Son of Mary. This Lectureship must be something more than a lectureship in moral philosophy, or in church theology; it must be a lectureship in Christian morality, or practical ethics from the standpoint of Christ's own personal character, example, and teachings.

### IV. QUALIFICATION OF THE LECTURER

Fourthly, the Qualification for the lecturer. The founder hopes that the lecturer may often be, perhaps generally, a layman; for instance: a merchant, a banker, a lawyer, a statesman, a physician, a scientist, a professor, an artist, a craftsman; for Christian ethics is a matter of daily practical life rather than of metaphysical theology. The founder cares not what the ecclesiastical connection of the lecturer may be; whether a Baptist or an Episcopalian, a Quaker or a Latinist; for Christian ethics as Christ's behavior is not a matter of ecclesiastical ordination or of sect. The only pivotal condition of the Lectureship in this particular is this: The lecturer himself must be unconditionally loyal to our only King, our Lord Jesus Christ; for Jesus Christ himself is the world's true, everlasting Ethics.



## "THE VALLEY OF DECISION"

---

"With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you, my brothers, as an act of intelligent worship, to give Him your bodies, as a living sacrifice, consecrated to Him and acceptable by Him. Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all His demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity."<sup>1</sup>

### I

In one of his most penetrating chapters, Dostoyevsky discusses the anxiety and agony which people endure in exercising their freedom to make decisions. So dreadful do men find the bearing of freedom that this becomes the major reason why the Christian Church in the person of the Grand Inquisitor rejects her Lord when Dostoyevsky brings Him back for a brief visit to the human scene of 15th century Spain. In the bitter speech by which he condemns Jesus the Grand Inquisitor says, "Nothing has ever been more insupportable for a man and a human society than freedom. . . . Didst Thou forget that man prefers peace, and even death, to freedom of choice in the knowledge of good and evil? . . . Nothing is more seductive for man than his freedom of conscience, but nothing is a greater cause of suffering."<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Romans 12:1, 2; as translated by J. B. Phillips in "Letters to Young Churches," MacMillan Co., quoted by permission of the publishers.

<sup>2</sup> "The Brothers Karamazov," The Modern Library, Book V, Ch. V, pp. 262 and 264.

Actually, as Dostoyevsky himself knows, these words speak a massive falsehood. A perceptive reading of history simply cannot blink the fact that the brutal denial of freedom to man inevitably issues in a judgment of blood precisely because man is so made that oppression and slavery are more intolerable to him than death. Man's freedom comes initially as the gift of his Creator who has fashioned him as a free spirit and who will deal with him only as a free being, the Creator who craves nothing more and expects nothing less than our faith and love offered in voluntary allegiance. Freedom is a given structure of man's nature, as well as a form of his final fulfillment, and in the end he cannot and will not relinquish it. There is then terrible untruth in these words by which the Grand Inquisitor rejects Christ.

But there is also, as Dostoyevsky again knows, a startling and significant element of truth expressed in them, and it is this that I propose to consider. The subject which I have chosen for this Boardman Lecture in Christian Ethics is the experience of personal decision. For it is in this area of making personal decisions that there arises one of the most urgent ethical problems we confront today. The prophet Joel in a poem written some twenty-three centuries ago could say, "Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision."<sup>3</sup> Today, it appears to me, this is just the situation from which we attempt to escape. We of the multitudes spend a great deal of our time and energy, as the Grand Inquisitor indicates, in trying to climb out of that

---

<sup>3</sup> Joel 3:14. Unless otherwise noted, Biblical quotations are taken from the Revised Standard Version.

valley of decision or in seeking not to enter it in the first place. In other words our freedom to make personal decisions is something we consciously or unconsciously strive to avoid. And the effective indication of this is that our society is engulfed by a tidal wave of conformity.

## II

Since the thrust of this lecture will be directed for personal decision and against mere conformity it will be well at the outset to define these terms and indicate a frame of reference. We shall be using conformity largely in the sense of adopting prevailing conventions in an unthinking and irresponsible way; a falling into current fashions, as it were, without deliberation. By personal decision we shall mean the full use of one's free power to scrutinize, criticize, and evaluate, and often with real agony to wrestle prayerfully so as to come to a responsible choice of one's own. Obviously, in a sense, even blind conformity represents a decision of some sort and one must be held responsible for it. It is true also that after due critical reflection one may deliberately decide to conform. On the whole, however, the phenomenon of conformity as we see it today would appear to be characterized by precisely the absence or avoiding of what is notable and essential in free personal decision, and to be instead this unreflective falling into arbitrary and standardized stereotypes. If it is a decision at all, it is a decision made for us, not by us. Herein is its insidious danger.

Nor is this attack on conformity to be interpreted

as a glorifying of non-conformity for its own sake. Each instance has to be examined, experimented with, passed before judgment, and finally decided upon. Indeed it is a person's decision as to what is really basic in life that gives him the point of departure from which he thinks through life and its experiences and out of which comes his duty to decide as to his non-conformity. This basis and point of departure I take to be the living God of the Bible as He makes Himself supremely known in Jesus Christ. It is a personal decision for this God which gives a man the motive and the duty to be a non-conformist in many spheres of human existence. Thus, on the whole, Christians have found in their allegiance to God their basis for opposing racial discrimination and segregation in the North and in the South, for denouncing McCarthyism and all its works, for attacking the bigoted restrictions of the McCarran-Walter Immigration Act, and for criticizing a security system which conceals the accuser from his victim, if one may but cite a few rapid examples. As St. Peter and the early apostles put it, "We must obey God rather than men."<sup>4</sup> But, of course, even God requires our personal decision rather than our blind conformity.

### III

One of the most glaring instances of the shutting off of personal decision is seen in modern advertising. The overwhelming pressure put upon us by advertising is one of the dominant characteristics of our culture. No doubt this springs partly from the

---

<sup>4</sup> Acts 5:29.

fact that we in America have an economy which is ever expanding in nature and based upon mass production. This necessitates mass consumption of new goods and hence pressure-advertising to the end that we shall consume in ever increasing volume. Products are urged upon us with little or no regard for our need or desire and the goal of advertising seems to be to persuade us that we need many things which we had never dreamed we required. To a large extent the function of such advertising is not to inform us about products but rather to stimulate within us a restless dissatisfaction with what we have. Its aim is not to lead us to reflective decisions but to an automatic drifting with the tide. It seeks to convince us that luxuries are actually necessities and that we absolutely must have the very latest model of the product in question. No doubt the fact that my automobile is now ten years old makes me unusually sensitive to this, for I have found the pressure of my family coinciding remarkably with the urgent message of automobile manufacturers, and indeed bidding fair to outdo it.

This pressure to consume beyond our need and this quick dissatisfaction with last year's models are part of an atmosphere which tends to cut the nerve of personal decision and press us into a common mould. Its effectiveness is seen in its extreme success. Most of us are doing exactly as it suggests. Rather than engaging in the free critical thought which leads to real decision, we are allowing the pressures around us to choose for us. After all, when one is rowing a boat on



a river in flood it is much easier to row downstream than upstream.

This same handing of the power of decision over to external forces is frequently found in the case of young people who come to college and confront new companions and new customs. Thus the student who has never really thought through the use of alcoholic beverages and come to a personal conclusion about it finds himself in the midst of fellow students most of whom are drinking. In order to fit in and be one of the group, he begins to drink. His act does not stem from a responsible choice so much as from the pressure to conform. He has not carefully thought out the meaning of drinking, the proper use of alcohol, his responsibility to God, to others, and to himself. Instead he drinks because others have glasses in their hands. It is not that drinking is itself wrong. One may make a decision to drink that is a good and right choice. The trouble lies in the fact that for so many drinking does not represent any mature decision or reflective consideration but is actually the giving up or the avoiding of decision and the delegating of this power to others in an unthinking acceptance of prevailing standards.

To put this another way, we largely tend to reduce ethics to statistics. This is really the core of the issue and the matter of serious concern. Right becomes defined as that which is determined by prevailing practice. One interesting example of this today is found in the desegregation process set in motion by the Supreme Court decision declaring segregated schools to be unconstitutional. From a reading of the newspapers, it would seem that

those states and counties that comply with the law usually have a minority of 20% or less of Negroes. Communities, however, which approach the 50% ratio almost invariably seek some form of evading or defying the law. It is easier for a majority to live with a small minority than with a large one. And when the minority is large, the intergroup tensions increase. Moral ideals, in other words, are often related to percentage points; and moral standards are frequently set by observing and tabulating what most people are doing. In effect this is to abdicate the realm of real ethical values and to surrender the free experience of personal choice. One does not decide, he simply goes along with the crowd and conforms.

#### IV

It is most instructive to inquire into the reasons for this. The Christian Faith sees them as stemming from two roots: we are finite and we are sinners or, as this may be put, we are not God but we continuously act as though we were. It is certainly true that man is of limited understanding and that this is a source of much of the agony which, as Dostoyevsky indicated, accompanies decisions. We never know all the factors involved in a situation which calls for our choice. Said Thomas Edison, "No man knows but the millionth part of anything." So many choices have to be made with but partial understanding. Thus the prophet Joel could speak of the valley of decision as frequently being a place where "the



sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining.”<sup>5</sup>

Even when we give our best attention and research we still only know in part. Here is an American president who has suffered a heart attack. What is he to decide about a second term? On the one hand there is a legitimate interest in his own health, his family's concern for his future, his realization that the presidency requires a man's total powers and full-time abilities, his understanding of the crippling national and international implications of presidential incapacity. On the other hand is his conviction of the able leadership he can give, his concern to carry out the policies of his administration, his party loyalty, the confidence which the whole world seems to have in him. Countless factors are involved and in a baffling inter-relationship so that no finite mind can fully master them or follow through all their implications. Yet so much hangs on a decision which has to be made with but fragmentary knowledge. Hence the wrestling, the embarrassment, the anxiety, the hesitancy that surround finite beings in the making of decisions, with the result that we seek to avoid them where possible.

Perhaps the main reason for the extraordinary popularity of detective novels is that they present human experiences in terms of a problem which can have a predictable solution, not only final and complete, but also the only one possible. One simply adds up the clues as they occur and if the story be adequately and honestly written, one is

---

<sup>5</sup> Joel 3:15.

bound to come out with the correct answer and the problem is forever solved. Real life, however, does not share this neatness. Dorothy Sayers, who has gained fame as a skilled writer of detective fiction and as a person possessed of penetrating Christian insight, has made this point with telling clarity, especially in regard to human relationships. As she puts it, "To add John to Mary . . . does not produce a 'solution' of John's and Mary's combined problem; it produces George or Susan, who (in addition to being a complicating factor in the life of his or her parents) possesses an independent personality with an entirely new set of problems."<sup>6</sup> In love and hatred, in unemployment and juvenile delinquency, in politics and economics and international relationships, beyond the fact that one cannot ever get to know all the clues is the additional fact that, even when clues are ferreted out and added up, very frequently they not only fall short of a solution but even give rise to new and more complex problems. Our purposive acts have many other consequences beyond their foreseen and intended ones. Again and again we discover that our manner of solving a problem is the cause of several new problems which may, indeed, be more troublesome than the ones already resolved. To cite the most glaring illustration, the advanced technics of our age have not reduced the number of pressing difficulties that disturb us but, on the contrary, have actually increased this number. Our finiteness prevents us from knowing all the facts involved in human situations and from controlling them with power. Hence our decisions

---

<sup>6</sup> "The Mind of the Maker," Harcourt, Brace and Co., p. 187.

always involve a radical element of risk and error.

But man is also sinful. He has an exaggerated concern for his own prestige; he does not want to lose face nor does he wish to open himself up for criticisms which might destroy not only the high opinions of others about himself but also his own self-confidence. He does not like to admit his limitations or risk the errors to which they might lead. For, above all, decisions commit a person; they involve him in this course of action or that. They necessitate overt participation in this cause or that. But commitment and participation open one up to public scrutiny and, in this, one may be found to be supporting the unpopular cause or involved in the wrong course of action. Decisions destroy man's neutrality; they bring about, so to speak, his fall from the innocence of pre-decision to the responsible action and perhaps the guilt of post-decision. They are avoided because they declare a man and lay him bare to a judgment which may cost dearly in lost prestige.

Then, too, every decision narrows down the remaining possibilities. Whenever a person decides for one possibility he decides against others. Every choice closes doors. If a man decides to be a statesman, he largely sacrifices the poetic or scientific or financial possibilities he would like to develop, for one cannot develop equally in all directions. In the same way periods of history which develop one determining idea largely suppress the truth of other possible ideas. The great emphasis on the nation brought creative and valuable results, but it also broke the unity of mankind, and no effort on the part of various international groups to reestablish

this unity has so far succeeded. But in his grandiose estimate of himself man is unwilling to cut off future possibilities. He wants to realize and enjoy every possibility and thus to be God. He wishes to deny his status as a limited creature and keep his future as open as possible, overestimating his own ability and wisdom and strength. Every decision excludes possibilities and so narrows life. Yet those that are ruled out may prove to be more fruitful than those chosen. So man seeks to hold decisions in abeyance.

One sees this combination of finiteness and sin at work in a marked phenomenon of our day—that of the committee. I suppose there have never been so many committees in existence as there are today, taking up as they do so much time and frequently achieving so little. As one wit was led to remark, "If Moses had been a committee, the Israelites would still be in the wilderness." A major reason for committees is obviously that in our age of specialization no finite person can know all the facts. Hence by gathering several people together and addressing several minds to the problem there is a pooling of knowledge and judgment. But compounded with this in a curious way is the fact that if we can push responsibility onto a committee, we avoid having to make a personal decision. And in the event that a committee decision proves to be wrong, it is remarkable how not only those who appoint the committee, but also the members of it, feel able to disassociate themselves from the committee as a whole and regard it as something apart from themselves so that it can bear a blame which they as individuals do not share.

## V

Actually, however, life forces us to make some choices. Mr. Truman says in his memoirs that within the first few months of 1945 he discovered that "being a President is like riding a tiger. A man has to keep on riding or be swallowed . . . a President either is constantly on top of events or, if he hesitates, events will soon be on top of him."<sup>7</sup> Decisions have to be made for life marches.

Of course, it is even deeper than that. Life is lived in the presence of God, and this encounter with God makes decisions inescapable. According to the Biblical understanding of human life, personal decision is the constant demand of existence because of God and His creation of man as a free and responsible being and therefore a deciding being. Decision is the expression of the fact that life is personal and is lived under God. The dynamic character of Biblical religion is found right here. The very fact of God calls for decisions from personal beings. God commands, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden;"<sup>8</sup> man has to choose whether to obey or disobey. God plans, "I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants . . . to be God to you and to your descendants;"<sup>9</sup> man faces a decision to cooperate or contradict. God promises, "I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your descendants also can be

---

<sup>7</sup> "Memoirs of Harry S. Truman," paragraph 1 of Vol. II, "Years of Trial and Hope," Doubleday and Co., quoted by permission of 1956 Time Inc.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 3:3.

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 17:7.



counted;"<sup>10</sup> man chooses to believe or disbelieve. God threatens, "The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me . . . and now you are cursed . . . you shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth;"<sup>11</sup> man responds with fear or arrogance or change of heart. God loves, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly;"<sup>12</sup> man decides to accept or reject. This is the way life is made and we cannot escape it. It is this fact of God addressing Himself to man which creates of man a person, a rational, responsible, and deciding center. God confronts man and God must be understood and wrestled with, He must be accepted or rejected in free interpretation and free decision. In Biblical understanding the basic human problem is not that of knowing what is true and what is right. Instead, the human problem begins precisely when man knows what is true and what is right, for the true and the right encounter man as implications of the self-disclosure of God and for that very reason they lay upon man a constant and limitless demand for decision.

This is why the Bible can never look upon moral standards as identifiable with arbitrary or shifting conventions, nor as the product of prevailing behaviour patterns. Actually moral standards are not a matter of opinion at all; they are a matter of fact. A man's opinion about the law of gravity may be right or wrong, but there it is. It stands regardless of what he thinks about it. It binds and claims all men. It is no less valid in the United

---

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 13:16.

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 4:10-12.

<sup>12</sup> John 10:10.

States than in China. So the Bible looks upon moral standards as having their roots in the structure of reality as God has made it. They encounter us as implications of God's revelation of Himself to us. They are concerned with the way God has created our nature and the universe itself, not merely with what we may happen to find a great many people doing. It is not just a matter of what appeals to a man. It is a matter of what claims and binds him in life as it is given to him. The fact of the law of gravity may not always appeal to everyone, particularly to the person who is falling from the top rung of a ladder, but it does bind everyone. The fact that by continuous cheating one degrades his dignity as a child of God and destroys the basic integrity of his personality may not appeal to everyone, but nonetheless it claims every person. And when people defy it, they do so to their own hurt and to the hurt of others. Sooner or later we have to come to terms with moral fact as it is ingrained in the structure of life. Only so can our deepest and most genuine potentialities come into full fruition. Hence the constant charge laid upon us to decide, and to do so with the best that is in us.

Man's existence, then, in relation to God is above all an ethical existence.<sup>13</sup> We are always burdened with decision. We must decide for or against God, for or against Christ, for or against the righteousness of the kingdom of God. Thus the prophet Elijah can pinpoint human existence by saying, "How long will you go limping with two different

---

<sup>13</sup> This point has been well made by Paul Tillich in his "Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality," University of Chicago Press, Chs. IV and VI.



opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him."<sup>14</sup> The choice is urgent, it has to be made now and it has far-reaching consequences. It determines man's eternal destiny and the destiny of nations. Seen in this light, Biblical ethics have very little to do with ethics as they are commonly understood, with ethics as avoiding a few things which are thought to be wrong and doing a few things which are deemed to be right. Indeed the truly ethical activity is not so much an endeavor to do something as an endeavor to become a special kind of somebody, to respond to God's call to be sons of God rather than just to perform a series of good acts. This is seen most clearly in the teachings of Jesus. For what is original and unique in the ethics of Jesus is not just that He increased the range and depth of the demand of God's law, or that He made luminous what had before been opaque, or that He picked out from the total corpus and then highlighted the heart, although He did all of this.

What is original and unique is that He showed the purpose of God's law to be not the doing of this or that but rather the becoming of a person motivated by an utterly disinterested love, the living of a life cleared of all isolating egoism and founded on the selfless love of God and neighbor.

This overcoming of exaggerated self-love is the result of an ingression of the love of God. And this is the reason, of course, why the ethical demand of Jesus inevitably raises the question which is resolved in His own person, the question of sal-

---

<sup>14</sup> 1 Kings 18:21.

vation, of new life, of the transformation and reconstitution of man's very self. That is why when St. Paul wants to talk about ethics he starts out by saying, "Let God re-mould your minds from within."<sup>15</sup> Biblical ethics mean living in the face of ultimate decisions for or against the God who works out our salvation. And intertwined with this kind of ethical approach is the fact that the nearer we come to God the closer we move to one another. In the figure used by a Russian abbot, life is a circle with God as the center and the radii being the lives of men. It is obvious that as we approach the center, there will be increasing proximity among the radii.

Always, however, God addresses Himself to man as a free being. In the very demand for decision man's freedom is completely respected. He may decline God and reject Him. God does not force Himself on anyone; He does not overpower man for this would destroy him as a responsible, deciding center. If a man wants to leap into the Schuylkill River and drown himself, God will not stop him. If he wants to go out tonight and become intoxicated and make himself a nuisance to everyone in the community, God will not prevent him from doing it. If he wants to weave around himself a tight web of selfish desires and spend all his money and time and energy on himself, God will let him go ahead and do it. God does not make us do what He wants or impose His will upon us. He respects our freedom to the extent that He allows us chances to make mistakes, to do wrong, and, if we choose, to go wrong. We can

---

<sup>15</sup> Romans 12:2, Phillips' translation.

learn to appreciate and respond to the wonder of the Bach B minor Mass or we can sit through it completely untouched and come out asking what it is all about. We can live with the most magnificent eloquence the English language can produce, those timeless experiences of the human soul, Hamlet facing indecision, Lady Macbeth wrestling with remorse, Portia pleading for mercy, or we can live with literary rubbish. We can thrill to the splendor and majesty of the Grand Canyon brought within easy reach by modern transportation or we can stand before it unmoved and hurry away for a coke and hot dog. We can live with God or we can turn our backs to Him. The summons to decision is inherent in the very structure of life as we meet it under God, but always God respects our freedom. This is at the core of New Testament ethics even as it became one of the major chords struck by the Reformation. For the emphasis and insistence of the Reformation were not on the right but rather on the duty of private judgment. It is not the chaotic individualism that everyone is at liberty to think what he likes; it is rather concern for the integrity of personal existence, the ethical insistence that every person is by his very nature as a person obligated to master his own experience as completely as he can and come to terms with it in decision. The one thing God unalterably requires is that we make full use of our freedom in order to arrive at a carefully thought-out decision about Himself.

## VI

Right here is where a peculiar difficulty arises. So many of us who think we have already made this choice and actually count ourselves for God have really not used our freedom to make a decision about Him but have instead unthinkingly conformed as to a harmless convention. Much religion today is second-hand rather than first-hand. We have inherited it from our families or borrowed it from our friends, we marry into it or we take it over much as we do the cut of our clothes from the fashion of our group. It is like an honorary degree conferred upon us but not earned in course. This is religion by hearsay, not by personal experience and appropriation. So many of us accept God as we accept Mozart, a great musical genius in whose supreme value we believe but whose works we do not know for ourselves and in whom we are not particularly interested. But religion of this sort has lost its uniqueness. Its distinctively sharp edges have been blunted. Even if we manage to delude ourselves, the penetrating eye of the enemy sees the fallacy of this. Thus Friedrich Nietzsche the greatest of the modern foes of Christianity says of Jesus, "His disciples should look more redeemed," and in saying this lays bare the cold fact that second-hand, emasculated religion never transforms character. It will always be ridiculous to see people who are Christians by fashionable convention putting on a tasteful Christian costume or assuming an air à la Christian as the occasion demands. We can inherit books, and houses, and table manners but not, in the final analysis, God. Conventional acquiescence to God without costly personal experi-

ence of Him is again a handing over of the duty of decision to someone else and a falling into mere conformity.

A great Danish theologian has likened the decision for God to a desperate leap over a deep chasm.<sup>16</sup> Such a leap is an act of soul-searching solitude; no one else can make it for you. The responsibility for it lies with yourself alone. So the decision for God cannot be made by clutching the coattails of someone else who is making that leap. To accept God because of the activity or prestige of another is to embrace not God but simply the other person's authority. And for those who do thus conform to God without the free wrestling of personal decision the problem is in its most troublesome form. It is far more difficult for those who have conformed to God actually to decide for Him than it is for those who stand against Him. Consider an illustration from the realm of athletics. If one is going for distance, the most difficult jump to make is when one has to jump from a fixed standing position. Greater distance is achieved when you can gain a running start on the spot from which the jump takes off. Thus the record for the collegiate running broad jump is 26 feet, 8¼ inches, well over twice the distance ever achieved in the standing broad jump when that event was included in our track meets. The same kind of thing is true about the decisive movement to God. The hardest decision is not that in which a person who is far removed from

---

<sup>16</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, "Concluding Unscientific Postscript," Oxford University Press, Book Two, Part One, Ch. II and Book Two, Part Two, Ch. IV.



God decides to accept God. His very distance enables him to gain a preliminary running start. He knows he is not for God and therefore that he has a real choice to make. The most difficult decision is when a person is supposedly close to God, so close indeed that the matter seems already decided, as in the case of those of us who adopt God by conformity. We mistakenly imagine we already have God and in this delusion it never even occurs to us to seek after Him. We gain no running start for the leap, indeed we are not even aware that we have any leap to make because the very need for a decision has been clouded and covered. It appears that the leap has already been made and the decision itself accomplished; the whole matter is closed.

## VII

The most crucial need then is this personal decision for God, and on the part of those of us who have merely conformed to Him. The interesting thing is that it is just this decision which brings with it the revolutionary power which breaks the rigid jacket of conformity in life. One of the most costly errors of our time is the judgment that the Christian Faith no longer has the revolutionary power which was associated with it in its early days when people could characterize Christians as "men who have turned the world upside down."<sup>17</sup> It is popularly thought that this power of revolution and surging new life has passed from Christianity to Marxism. Yet, after a recent trip to Africa, Chester Bowles could say, ". . . In the

---

<sup>17</sup> Acts 17:6.

last 300 years, the most politically explosive force in Africa has been the Bible and so far the impact of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* has been almost nil." Our present writing-off of Christianity's revolutionary power stems in part, at least, from the fact that in the leading countries of the Western world (unlike Africa) Christianity has been more or less securely established for such a long time. The issue always appears as a struggle to preserve Christianity rather than to attain it. We talk today of defending Christianity, not of establishing it. The comfortable assumption is that we know perfectly well what Christianity is, we have it in our midst, we believe it in our own fashion, and we practice it within the limits of human capacity and the opportunity our times provide. Our attitude is essentially one of conserving, and a conservative attitude, however fine and valid, is nearly always less exciting and less able to stimulate and sustain the zeal and devotion which revolutionary movements awaken so easily. The conviction of the revolutionist that he is on the side of the future against the past and present has a thrill and warmth to it which many people find emotionally attractive as well as a source of intellectual validity and moral purpose. Christianity, to be sure, has by no means fulfilled all the hopes and goals inherent within it but it has arrived and become established and as a result people do not regard it as the source of a revolutionary power.

Actually, however, Christianity with its unre-served commitment to God is the well-spring of a power of revolution and new life beyond all others. St. Paul knew this when he wrote to the



Christians at Rome, "With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you, my brothers, as an act of intelligent worship, to give Him your bodies, as a living sacrifice, consecrated to Him and acceptable by Him. Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God remould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all His demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity."<sup>18</sup> Paul could think of non-conformity as the direct consequence of a decision for God. The entire pattern of blind conformity is broken by the determination to live for God. This choice brings the power of God to remould our lives from within, thus enabling us to engage in the kind of creative living which refashions the world rather than allowing ourselves to be squeezed into its mould. That the person who gives himself to God is no automatic conformist is seen supremely in the figure of Jesus Christ. So disturbing was His non-conformity that the only place the world could fit Him in was on the Cross. The source of Christianity's revolutionary power lies in this decision for God. Because one gives himself to God he is enabled to transform the world. For one's loyalty is to the God who can say, "Behold, I make all things new."<sup>19</sup>

Certainly that is what the experience of real people has shown over and again. One sees it in St. Peter during those days of the early Church when the Christians were few in number and none too sure of themselves.<sup>20</sup> While they were

---

<sup>18</sup> Romans 12:1, 2. Phillips' translation.

<sup>19</sup> Revelation 21:5.

<sup>20</sup> Acts 10 and 11.

preparing to carry on the work of their Master, they were called upon to struggle with a great prevailing prejudice. Were they to decide one way they would remain merely an obscure sect of Judaism; but, if the sights of their mission could be raised, theirs was to be a terrifying responsibility. Jesus had clearly instructed them to reach out to all men, for His glad tidings were not bound to any racial or national or social group. But this was revolutionary, for it meant smashing the barriers of strict separation between Jews and Gentiles. And it was Peter, empowered by his decision for God and enlightened by his commitment to Christ, who broke this mould. He rose above his prejudices, he preached to the Gentiles and brought them into the Christian community, and, in doing so, made possible the universal Church of all sorts and conditions of men. There was one of the world's great moments, filled as it was with a renovating strength which broke a rigid conformity because of a decision for God. Decisions for God result in other decisions which remake the world.

Or come down to where the 18th century turned into the 19th and to a young English cobbler named William Carey.<sup>21</sup> His little cobbler shop was cramped and narrow but his thoughts roamed the whole world. He kept a map of the world near him and it reminded him of the peoples on earth who had not heard the saving news of the Gospel. Somebody, he thought, must take it to them. Gradually the conviction grew on him that God meant that the somebody should be William Carey. He

---

<sup>21</sup> W. R. Bowie has an excellent brief note on Carey's life in "The Story of the Church," Abingdon Press, Ch. 30.

managed to interest a dozen people in his conviction that God had called him to do this job. They took up a collection that amounted to twelve pounds, two shillings, and sixpence and that was all they had except for one thing. As William Carey put that one thing, "Attempt great things for God; expect great things from God." That was enough to begin the movement that would send missionaries of the Gospel around the world. After great difficulties, Carey finally got to India. He established a church and a school and also the first printing press in India. He translated the Bible into the various Indian languages and dialects and sent it out from his printing press. His influence was decisive in putting an end to the ancient and cruel custom which decreed that when a man died his widow must be burned with him on his funeral pyre. When Carey himself died his mission in northern India had grown to thirty stations with sixty-three Europeans and Indians serving in them. Here again was one of the world's great moments. Carey's decision for God enabled him to break through the settled conformity of keeping one's Christianity for oneself alone and in a splendid burst of transforming power Christianity could recover the original scope of its world-wide mission, so that Christians could share with others all over the world the glad tidings of God's saving power in Christ.

## VIII

It is in moments like these that Christian ethics come to life. For it is these moments of decision for God that admit Him into the secret parts of

our lives. They take us from the sidelines and plunge us into the thick of things; they make our lives God's to command, His to use and use up. Here is the bursting of squeezing conformity, for from these moments which shake the foundations of life there emerges prayerful and responsible living, throbbing as it does with that strong pulse beat of personal appropriation which is shared only by those free men who have dared to walk alone in the valley of decision. As the book of Deuteronomy puts it in words by which God exposes the most sensitive nerve of our humanity, "I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil . . . therefore choose . . ." <sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Deuteronomy 30:15, 19.

337457